

Exhibition: *Paul R. Williams: Architect for Living*

Dates: November 15, 2026–May 31, 2027

Location: Resnick Pavilion



(Image captions on page 3)

(Los Angeles, CA—October 7, 2026) The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) presents *Paul R. Williams: Architect for Living*. The most prominent Black American architect of his generation, Paul R. Williams helped shape his native Los Angeles during its rapid growth from the 1920s through the early 1970s. Williams brought his innovation and rigor to stylistically diverse residential, civic, religious, commercial, and hospitality projects that ranged from ambitious public housing to iconic hotels in Southern California, Las Vegas, and Latin America. *Architect for Living* will be presented alongside projects at the Getty Research Institute (GRI) and the USC Fisher Museum of Art, marking the largest and most comprehensive museum presentations to date of this influential figure. These presentations are the first to feature Williams's archive, which was acquired from his family by the GRI and USC School of Architecture in 2020.

LACMA's presentation demonstrates the impressive breadth of Williams's contributions, showcasing many never-before-exhibited drawings and photographs. The exhibition includes over 120 drawings, photos, and ephemera from the Paul R. Williams archive, supplemented by dozens of additional photographs, publications, and related objects, including the piano, a recent gift to LACMA, that Williams customized for his own residence. The LACMA exhibition is curated by Staci Steinberger, curator of decorative arts and design with Sarah Locke, architectural historian and research assistant in the decorative arts and design department.

"Architect for Living explores the extraordinary breadth of Paul Williams's work in Southern California and beyond," said Staci Steinberger. "Williams received numerous accolades in his lifetime, but has remained an understudied figure within

architectural history. We are excited to share more about the architect's practice and process in this LACMA exhibition."

"Paul R. Williams made an indelible impact on Los Angeles," said Michael Govan, LACMA CEO and Wallis Annenberg Director. "We're lucky to be able to celebrate his legacy, not just as LACMA, but in partnership with the Getty Research Institute, USC School of Architecture, and the USC Fisher Museum of Art."

The exhibition is designed by Studio Barnes, a Miami-based firm, which has incorporated details and colors inspired by Williams's work throughout the installation. In addition, LACMA will launch a dedicated website designed by Folder Studios to augment the exhibition, mapping projects across Southern California and providing additional documentation. The website will continue to grow throughout the show. The catalogue *I Am an Architect: Paul R. Williams and His Archive*, published by the Getty Research Institute, was produced to accompany the three exhibitions and will be released in December 2026.

Paul R. Williams: An Architect Considered is on view at the USC Fisher Museum of Art from August 18, 2026 – March 13, 2027 and *Paul R. Williams: Architecture Across the Color Line* will be on view at the Getty Research Institute from December 15, 2026–March 14, 2027.

Exhibition Highlights

Architect for Living provides an introduction to Williams's career through thematic sections that examine how different aspects of his work evolved over decades of practice. The first section, **America's Ace Architect**, begins in the moment midway through his career when Williams built his 1952 "dream house," a stylish modern residence in a neighborhood that had until recently been barred to Black homeowners. The story is told through drawings, photographs, publications, and furnishings. A chronological projection provides a broader overview, demonstrating how Williams's burgeoning practice mirrored the development of his native Los Angeles. The film showcases key projects across Southern California in context with images of the region's rapid expansion from the 1920s through the post-World War II boom and the decades that followed.

The next section, **Launching a Practice in the 1920s** traces the first decade of Williams's practice, establishing the versatility that would define his work in the ensuing decades. After developing his skills through positions at several prestigious architecture and landscape firms, he became the first Black architect licensed in the western United States in 1921 and went on to establish his own office. From his earliest years of practice, Williams's work encompassed everything from upscale homes in newly developed exclusive enclaves, commercial projects in rapidly urbanizing districts, and rustic resorts. Black institutions provided the young architect with opportunities like the Second Baptist Church and the 28th Street

YMCA, which became community landmarks in Los Angeles.

Expanding Visions in the 1930s follows the growth of his practice through World War II as he took on increasingly ambitious commercial and hospitality projects while maintaining a significant residential practice. His acclaimed designs for the Georgian Revival Music Corporation of America headquarters and Moderne interiors of Saks Fifth Avenue, which both opened in Beverly Hills in 1938, showcased his stylistic range. He began building internationally, with several commissions in Colombia, and during World War II took on large-scale government projects, many in collaboration with other notable local firms.

Around these core galleries, thematic sections engage with significant aspects of his career, from small homes to urban infrastructure. While Williams amassed publicity for luxurious estates and celebrity residences, he also prioritized moderately priced homes, a focus in **The Creator of Livable Homes**. This focus became critical as Los Angeles's wartime and postwar population boom led to housing shortages. Williams designed large-scale public housing for defense workers and low-income residents, as well as suburban tracts for returning veterans. Even as he took commissions in racially restrictive neighborhoods, he remained committed to Black homeownership, building housing in historically Black communities in Los Angeles and Las Vegas.

Mid-Century Dreamscapes explores Williams's sophisticated hospitality design. His updates to iconic properties like the Beverly Hills Hotel, the Ambassador, the Hollywood Knickerbocker, and El Mirador Hotel in Palm Springs projected a distinctly Californian vision of midcentury glamour. The desirability of this vision led to resort commissions beyond Southern California, including in Hawai'i, Mexico, and the Caribbean, though not all were realized. The exhibition also details his decades-long engagement in Las Vegas, where he played an early role in the development of the Strip and demonstrated a commitment to inclusive casinos.

Williams's urbanist aspirations are the subject of **Keeping Pace with Progress**, which highlights his role in major urban projects like the Los Angeles Civic Center and Los Angeles International Airport, influencing how people moved through the modern city and experienced civic life. Williams embraced postwar technologies and reimaged his signature curved forms in expressionist concrete, developing futuristic forms for hotels, commercial projects, and even an unrealized monorail concept.

Sacred Spaces spotlights religious architecture, which formed a throughline in Williams's practice from the 1920s through the 1960s. He designed around three dozen religious structures (not all of them built), creating vibrant spiritual, social, and political anchors, many for Black congregations. This section includes drawings for beloved icons such as First AME Church as well as new footage from inside Second Baptist Church and the Founder's Church of Religious Science.

The exhibition concludes with an exploration of Williams's legacy and the continuing life of some of his buildings. Williams's success stands as a beacon to a profession that still struggles with diversity and continues his lifetime efforts to champion the next generation of Black architects. While some of Williams's major structures have been lost, others have benefitted from determined public preservation efforts and thoughtful adaptations. The section includes documentation from some recent adaptations such as Koning Eizenberg Architecture's conversion of 28th Street YMCA into the 28th Street Apartments.

About Paul R. Williams

The most prominent Black American architect of the mid-20th century, Paul R. Williams (1894–1980) built prolifically in a career that spanned more than five decades. Acclaimed as an architect to the stars, with clients that included Frank Sinatra and Bill (Bojangles) Robinson as well as numerous other business and community leaders, Williams brought the same rigor and attention to detail to an impressive range of residential, civic, commercial, and hospitality projects. Born and raised in Los Angeles, he helped shape the city during a period of rapid growth, while also taking on significant commissions across the United States and in Latin America, most notably in Washington, D.C., Tennessee, Las Vegas, and Colombia. Deeply committed to housing at all scales, he wrote two books of middle class house plans— *The Small Home of Tomorrow* (1945) and *New Homes for Today* (1946)—and developed several housing tracts across California and Nevada as well as apartments and public housing, including Pueblo del Rio (1940–42) and Nickerson Gardens (1952–54) in Los Angeles. A pillar of Los Angeles's Black community, he designed several notable institutions including Angelus Funeral Home (1932–34), Golden State Mutual Life Insurance (1947–49), and First AME Church (1960–69). He developed and updated numerous hospitality projects, famously renovating and adding additions to storied properties such as the Beverly Hills Hotel (1941–59) and Ambassador Hotel (1948–49) and building key projects in Las Vegas, such as the sculptural La Concha Motel (1960–62). He contributed to major civic infrastructure projects in the 1950s and early 1960s including Los Angeles International Airport and Los Angeles County Courthouse. He was the first known Black member to join the American Institute of Architects (AIA) in 1923, was inducted as the organization's first Black fellow in 1957 and was posthumously awarded the prestigious AIA Gold Medal in 2017.

Related Public Programming

As part of LACMA's Third Weekend at LACMA series, the museum will present exhibition-related programs in November and December, including a panel discussion with Karen E. Hudson, Darren Walker, and Brigitte Romanek, moderated by Sandra Jackson-Dumont, on November 18; a self-guided tour of five Paul Williams–designed sites, presented in collaboration with the L.A. Conservancy and SoCal NOMA on November 21; and a gallery talk with artist Janna Ireland on December 18.

More related programs are slated for early 2027. For more information, visit lacma.org.

Credit: *Paul R. Williams: Architect for Living* was organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

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About LACMA: Located on the Pacific Rim, LACMA is the largest art museum in the western United States, with a collection of 155,000 objects that illuminate 6,000 years of artistic expression across the globe. Committed to showcasing a multitude of art histories, LACMA exhibits and interprets works of art from new and unexpected points of view that are informed by the region's rich cultural heritage and diverse population. LACMA's spirit of experimentation is reflected in its work with artists, technologists, and thought leaders as well as in its regional, national, and global partnerships to share collections and programs, create pioneering initiatives, and engage new audiences.

Location: 5905 Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles, CA, 90036. lacma.org

Image captions: Julius Shulman, Portrait of Paul R. Williams, 1952, Getty Research Institute, © J. Paul Getty Trust; Paul R. Williams, El Mirador Hotel alterations and additions, Palm Springs (perspective rendering), 1952, jointly owned by the University of Southern California School of Architecture and the Getty Research Institute, © Della M. Williams Trust Dated December 15, 1988

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